



STRONGER THAN EVER: A NARRATIVE AND PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT OF YOUNG ADULT CANCER SURVIVORS IN THE COLUMBUS, OHIO COMMUNITY

By: Heidi Liou; Advisors: Dr. Candace Stout, Dr. Jay Kandampully
Department of Consumer Sciences, College of Education & Human Ecology

INTRODUCTION

Stronger Than Ever is a narrative and photographic research project combining stories, inspirational quotes, and photographic portraits of young adult cancer survivors in the Columbus community. Young adults, a largely underrepresented group in the battle with cancer, account for 72,000 new cancer diagnoses each year (Stupid Cancer, 2013). The goal of this research project is to raise awareness within my own generation that cancer can strike at any age and that the likelihood of beating the disease is becoming more frequent as understanding of patients' needs, effective medical treatment and research funding increase. Through open-ended, conversational interviews, the perspectives and narrative experiences (stories) of young adults who have survived cancer are elicited, analyzed, and shared with a variety of audiences. The hope is that those who read the narratives, see the portraits, and listen to the testimonies in venues like YouTube, the Lantern, and other related social and academic forums, might become better informed about cancer as a disease and more sympathetic in their support for the cause.

METHODOLOGY

I arranged photo-shoots and face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews, asking volunteers to share experiences about their battle with cancer and how they have become empowered from the journey. Both men and women from a variety of cultural backgrounds offer candid and richly storied perspectives about their experiences. Their words are revealing and the portraits offer even more.

Some sample interview questions include:

1. How has cancer changed your way of life since being diagnosed?
2. Have people treated you differently because of your diagnosis?
3. What is something people can do—say, act, help—that can improve your situation?
4. Is it better for others to ignore the “elephant in the room” by not bringing it up, or would you rather they talk openly about it with you?
5. Do you feel your outlook on life has changed?

DISCUSSION

- Having a support group (friends/family) was crucial to keeping a positive mindset; wish there was a formal support group during treatment
- Many cancer survivors found new hobbies and interests
- Most of the survivors were involved in athletics and thought their cancer was just a sports related injury or growing pains
- Having good relationships and communication with doctors and nurses made their journey easier

CONCLUSIONS & SIGNIFICANCE

- In difficult times during cancer diagnosis and treatment, family and close friends often do not know how to interact with and support the cancer patient
- This project benefits friends and family of newly diagnosed patients, so that they might be more fully and sensitively supportive without the fear of saying or doing something wrong
- The stories and photographs of young adult cancer survivors can speak volumes, giving hope, and spreading awareness of the story of cancer
- These stories have been widely shared online through a Facebook page, Tumblr blog, and Twitter account, which will allow viewers to directly engage in conversations to bring about cancer awareness



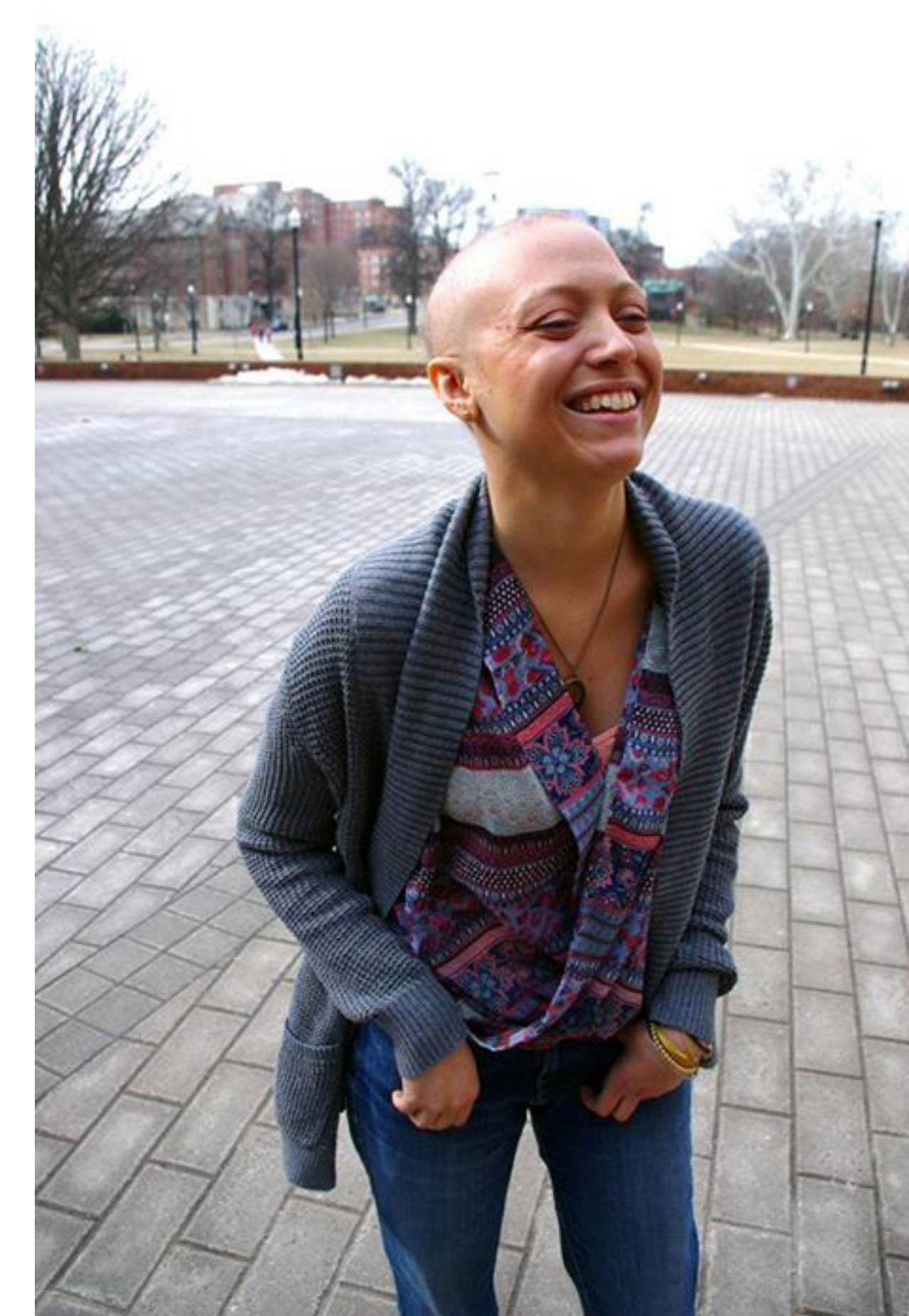
“Being treated at an adult cancer hospital certainly impacted my journey because I didn’t have that team of people there realizing that I was a kid. There weren’t puppy dogs painted on the walls; there weren’t suckers when you did a good job, so you had to grow up quick. My mom was my advocate because people didn’t know how to listen to a 14-year-old kid in the hospital. Doctors use words that- I still remember ‘Are you feeling fatigue?’ I didn’t know what the hell ‘fatigue’ was, so I would say no. And mind you, I was sleeping 22 hours a day, OF COURSE I’m feeling fatigue. ‘Um, are you feeling fatigue?’ and I would say no because I didn’t know what that word was, and my mom would have to explain to them and to me, and be a cross-interpreter.”



“Having hope or something to hold on to is the biggest thing for those just diagnosed. Have a positive outlook and know that you will be stronger from it. It’s hard to look at the positives, but it will make you that much stronger. Just don’t give up. Everything happens for a reason.”



“I always have the thought in the back of my head that it’s gonna come back, which is not good. I have a friend of mine that’s a doctor, and I talk about this with my doctor too, and he’s like ‘You’re good, you caught it early’ but you still obviously never know. I do not take life for granted. I do look at things a little differently. I’ve always been sentimental, but I’m much more sentimental now, in terms of having family here for certain things.”



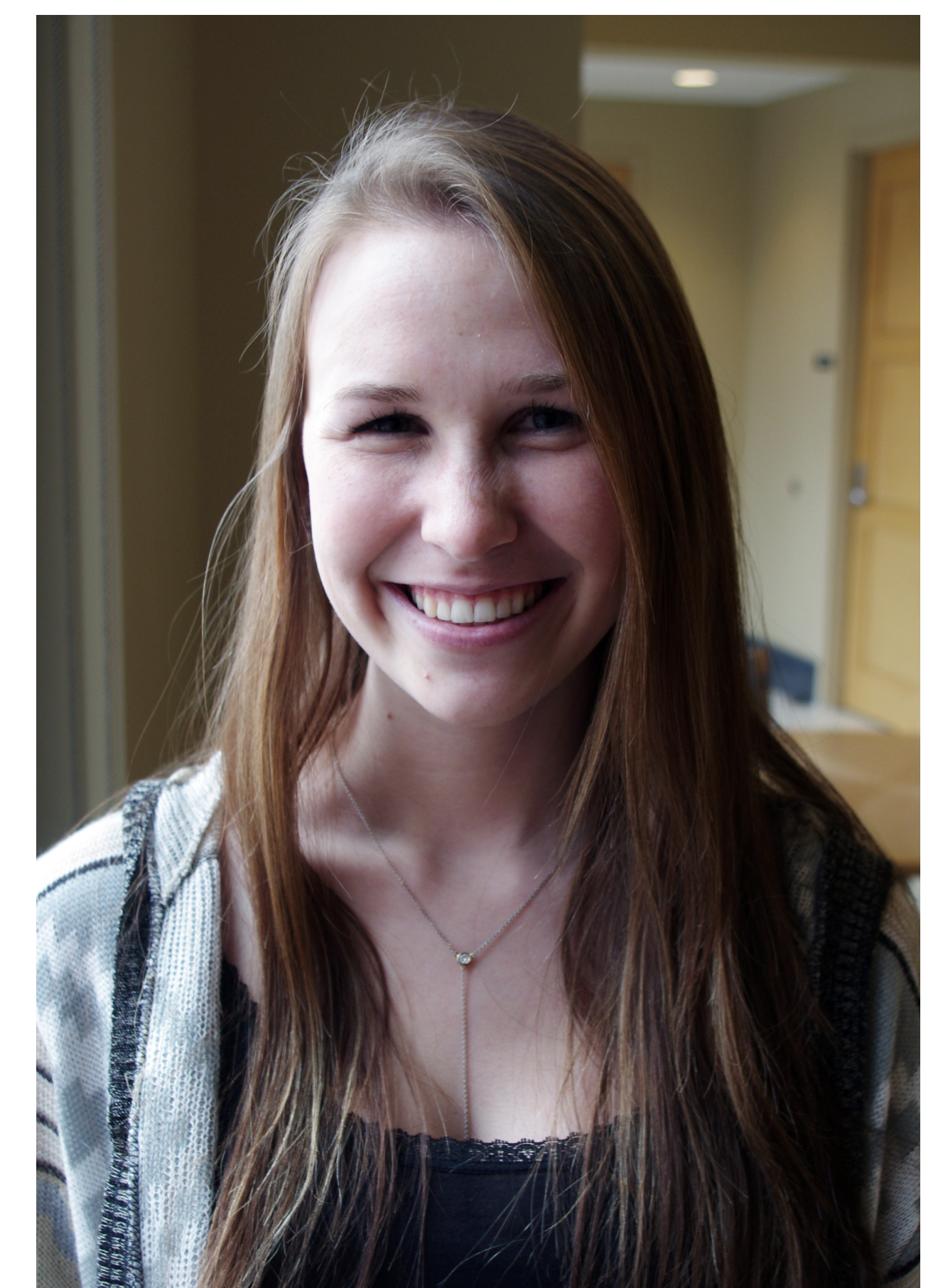
“It’s so interesting, the lingo that we use... ‘cancer survivors’, we’re ‘fighters’, we’re ‘battling’. I don’t know, in one way I get it, but in another way, I feel like I don’t do a whole lot; I’m just going to chemo and just sitting and receiving chemotherapy. I don’t feel like I’m ‘battling’ something, it’s not something I can actively see and actively do. If I could physically, fight cancer, or do something on my own, I totally would. There’s nothing I would want to do more, but I do feel like, I’ve been realizing and reflecting, that is more like a battlefield, or a fight, that I have in my brain, about what’s going on. So for me, it’s mostly when I think of the battle, it’s not the cancer per say, but of my mind. It’s the best way to describe it - that I’m always fighting against me in the moment, acknowledging it, not being in denial, because you can definitely do that; I sometimes do that, but being aware and willing to move forward and see past that...”



“There’s always questioning. I never doubted God’s existence, but I did question and seek to understand; I was curious. I will say, I think that was something that God really kept me from on his part, of keeping my mind from the ‘why me?’ I’m a super logical person, and so I knew heading in, right when I was diagnosed, the very first night I processed this on my own, I said to myself ‘I cannot go down this road, because this path leads to destruction and there is no end’. And so I think that was super healthy, and the Lord used my logic and reason-based understanding of what brings good and what brings evil to keep me from those things. My faith grew, and has grown, and is foundationally supported by my experience with cancer.”



“I was really depressed in the beginning but eventually you find a new normal. My normal, when I was a kid and early teen, was being the best kid in gym class and the runner; not to brag, but I was pretty athletically inclined, so that was my normal. And then I had to come to the realization that sports isn’t what defined me, but it was hard, because that’s what I loved the most. So I just had to find other interests and other qualities about myself that I could be proud of. You just have to find a new normal; there’s no way to get around having a struggle, it’s just a matter of getting through to the other side, and feeling like you are still worth something.”



“What is something that people can do to help current cancer patients?”
“I never wanted special treatment from people. So I think just treat them as normally as they can and don’t always talk about it while they’re going through treatment. You want to talk about other things and just kind of push that to the side for a little bit. We know they are there for us. They try to help, but going through treatment takes away your sense of independence. So you need them there for simple tasks that you did before, and they help you with that, in little ways. But then again you don’t want them to smother you and make you so dependent on them.”